

Intercultural Awareness Through Drama

By Katharine Isbell

At Miyazaki International College (MIC), a small liberal arts college in Japan, fourth-semester students are required to study in Anglophone countries, and it is the English Department's responsibility to prepare these students, both academically and personally. An informal survey of the predominately North American faculty at MIC stressed the need for our Japanese students to change their communication styles in order to better meet instructor expectations of student performance in Western academic settings. Specifically, students needed to speak up, make eye contact, be more confident, state their opinions, and act independently from others. So, members of the English department began to think about a curriculum that could affect this change in the students and give them insights into what entering a new culture might be like.

My colleague, Marni Baker, and I had discussed the possibility of starting a drama group, not as a means of producing a play, but rather as a way of providing students with an environment in which they could experience new and different feelings and be able to talk about them. We wanted to have the students engaged in activities that promoted risk-taking, shock, self-doubt, and fear. These activities would be followed by small group debriefings during which the causes of these feelings would be analyzed and future situations that might bring on these same feelings would be projected. Although we had little previous experience in drama work, we felt we could develop a workshop format that would bring about a change in the students' communication styles, thereby resulting in greater student self-confidence.

Planning

Over the winter break we developed a workshop in which drama techniques and activities were used to facilitate students' self-expression (see Appendix 1 below). We designed a ten-day 20-hour intensive workshop, based on the following considerations.

1. We wanted to establish a safe and familiar environment in which the students would eventually feel comfortable enough to honestly and openly discuss what was going on in the workshop. Therefore, we incorporated exercises that we could do everyday to build group identity and solidarity.
2. We wanted to have a careful progression of activities that would build on each other and that would gradually increase the communication risks we were asking the students to take. We wanted students involved in new and challenging activities from the first day, but we didn't want to lose anybody along the way by asking them to do something they weren't ready to do.
3. After all activities, we wanted discussions that allowed students to react to the feelings and ideas generated by their participation and to the intercultural implications inherent in many of the activities.

We decided that each day would always consist of the following progression of activities:

Risk-taking activities

These activities promote three kinds of student behavior. First, they introduce students to the process of taking risks and make them analyze the effects of these risks on their physical, psychological, and cultural identity. Secondly, the activities contribute to, encourage and build group identity, and finally, they allow students the opportunity to discuss a variety of intercultural issues.

Movement warm-up

The daily "movement warm-up" consists of movements that allowed the participants to physically prepare for the day. We include yoga breathing exercises to help focus the concentration needed for the day's activities, and we make music an integral part of this session.

Movement activities

Through movement activities students learn strategies for expressing communicative meaning through body language. These activities range from simple physical actions to more complex expressions of emotion and character. The activities are performed individually as well as in small and large group formats.

Voice warm-up

The voice warm-up routine gives the participants an environment in which they are expected to be loud and take risks with the sound of their own voices. It also prepares them physically to use their voices effectively by focusing on skills, such as breathing, posture, and projection. These activities are absolutely critical for students in order to make the transition to the next set of activities.

Voice activities In this final section of the progression, students learn how to creatively express their ideas, emotions, and cultural perspective using English. Activities range from improvisation to the production and performance of short student-generated scripts.

Other considerations

We decided to hold the workshop in the school's large gymnasium, which is equipped with a stage, and provides enough space and an atmosphere befitting drama activities. Music, ranging from classical to ethnic to hard rock, is used extensively throughout the workshop to set moods and create a comfortable environment.

We defined our own roles as that of "coaches," responsible for pacing the activities and any needed timekeeping. We also have to be aware of students' feelings and emotions as they engage in the various new and different activities. At the same time we encourage the students to articulate their feelings and emotions in the post-activity discussions. There are always two coaches, which give us the flexibility we need when working with the students in various groupings.

Depending on the day's activities, we invite other native-English speakers to participate, and to a lesser degree, to facilitate the activities and discussions. Prior to the workshop, we meet with outside participants to provide them with the overall and daily objectives and to give them a brief training on how to encourage discussion without stifling student participation.

A Typical Day

A typical day illustrates how these components come together and build on each other.

In "Pulsing," the risk taking activity, students sit in a circle holding hands and create an electric current by receiving a quick squeeze from the person on their right and simultaneously squeezing the hand of the person on their left. We direct the participants to concentrate on a color during the activity, and afterwards, poll them to see if one color prevailed through mental communication. In the follow-up discussion, we investigate the following key words and concepts: cooperation, concentration, working together, group energy, and personal space.

After the movement warm-up (See Appendix 2 below), we begin the first of three movement activities. The first activity is loosely based on Laban's theory (Evans and Smith 1992) which states that all movement can be broken down into six simple actions: pulling, pushing, punching, wringing, smoothing, and floating. For each of these actions, the participants experiment with real objects, then try to recreate the motion without objects. While the students are performing the action with the real object, the coaches, using Laban's typology, direct the students' attention to the details of each movement. During the pantomime, the coaches provide assistance and encouragement by continually asking the students to relate the practice to the application.

The second activity, "The Human Machine," extends the students' experimentation with the expression of simple actions through movements. In small groups, students connect individual movements to create a machine in which all members play an integral part. Each movement is accompanied by a machine sound, such as a hiss, plop, crunch, and so forth. These machines practice moving in all directions while maintaining their interconnected actions and sounds. The activity culminates in a war of machines. Two machines are directed toward each other on a crash course with no expected outcome. The results can be anything from some machines passing through each other with no disintegration to one or both machines falling apart. Post-activity discussion again focuses on the concepts of cooperation, concentration, and working together. Students discuss how the machine models imitated interaction within and between cultures.

The final movement activity explores the differences in greetings from culture to culture and their expressions through verbal language, gestures, and personal space values. First, the coaches model greetings from various cultures; some may be familiar, while others may be quite new and possibly strange. For each model, students addressed these questions: "What was the verbal greeting?" "What gestures did they use?" "What is the personal space value?" Then students model what they feel is a typical greeting in their culture and discuss the same questions. In the final part of the activity termed, "Interplanetary Greetings," students in small groups generate verbal greetings, gestures, and personal space values for their own, and new cultures.

During post-activity discussion students begin what should be an ongoing analyses of the intercultural causes of miscommunication and culture shock in all areas of communication and how both may affect students as they travel or study abroad.

After the voice warm-up (See Appendix 3 below), students conclude the day's workshop with a voice activity during which students deliver short dialogs at different volumes. To help the

students achieve this, we use the entire area of the gym. First, we divide the participants into pairs, give them short dialogs, and place them in the center of the gym. Then as each pair finishes their reading, they take three steps back and repeat the dialog until they have reached the sides of the gym. Refinement of intonation, stress, character, and emotion comes later in the workshop. Each day as new elements are added, old elements are reworked in different ways.

Halfway through the workshop, students get into working groups to write and practice short scenes. As coaches, we offer advice, but leave the bulk of the work up to the students as we want to observe the personal growth that is taking place in them. The workshop concludes in a final performance of all the group scenes.

Outcome

We were greatly pleased with the results of the workshop. Comments in the post-workshop evaluations indicated that the goals of the workshop were achieved. Many students indicated a greater awareness of their communication styles. Students also wrote that they had been able to experience new and different feelings in a secure environment that gave them the support they needed to talk about these experiences. As one student succinctly put it, "I learned how I should express my feeling in English."

More excitingly, we believe that the benefits of the workshop carried over into the students' study abroad experience. While we admit a more rigorous study is needed, the e-mail communications we have received from the students studying abroad seem to indicate that these students were better prepared to cope with the intricacies of living in new and different cultures. We are eagerly looking forward to our next workshop and follow-up research. (Based on these outcomes.)

Appendix 1

Self-Expression through Drama Techniques and Activities

Marni Baker/Katharine Isbell
SPRING ENGLISH PROGRAM

Course objectives:

(1) To help you better express yourself through speaking by exploring how sound, movement, voice, gestures, cultural barriers, and images can affect our communication.

(2) To encourage greater self-confidence in your speaking ability by engaging in drama activities such as risk-taking, voice projection, interpretive movement, and role playing.

Course overview:

This will be a lively, fast-paced class. You will take part in a wide variety of drama activities that will help you express emotions, feelings, and ideas through movement and speaking.

Activities:

- voice projection and pronunciation
- cultural awareness of space, touch, and eye contact
- exploration of the relationship between emotions and words
- risk-taking and cooperative games
- movement
- role playing
- image manipulation
- music and mood
- integration of elements to intensify the message

Goals:

After two weeks you will

- express your emotions, feelings, and ideas better
- exhibit more self-confidence in your speaking skills

Appendix 2

Movement warm-up ritual

- | | |
|---|-------------------------|
| 1. Head up and down | 8x |
| 2. Head side to shoulder | 8x |
| 3. Head rolls | 2x to right |
| 4. Head rolls | 2x to left |
| 5. Arm swings | 8x alternate |
| 6. Arm swings | 8x |
| 7. Back twists | 8x alternate back twist |
| 8. Extensions | 8x alternate |
| 9. Hip rolls | 4x to right |
| 10. Hip rolls | 4x to left |
| 11. Side stretches with hands behind head | 8x alternate |
| 12. Side stretches with arms extended | 8x alternate |
| 13. Bend over and arm pulls | 8x (arm pulls only) |
| 14. Open legs and rock over knees | 8x alternate |
| 15. Elbow to knee | 8x alternate |
| 16. Karate kicks | 8x alternate |
| 17. Jump forward, 2 jumps back | 8x |
| 18. Up on toes, heels down and straighten | 8x |
| 19. Feet apart, bend over waist, roll up | 1x |

Appendix 3

Direct Students to

1. Stand in the Mountain Pose (a yoga movement).
2. Close mouth. Make it as big inside as possible. Do not fill cheeks with air.
3. Open mouth and move the jaw from side to side.
4. Big yawn without making a sound.
5. Add noise to your yawn.
6. Lie on the floor, flat on your back.
7. Breathe using diaphragm - hands on your stomach to feel the movement.
8. Stand up in Mountain Pose.
9. Breathe slowly and deeply.
10. Continue breathing deeply, add "mmmmmm" Sound.
11. Repeat with
 - MMMMMaaaaaaa (a as in father)
 - MMMMMuuuuuuuu (u as in moo)
 - MMMMMoooooooo (o as in Joe)
 - MMMMMaaaauuuuoooo (be aware of the shape of your mouth when making sounds)
12. Take a deep breath - forcing the air out on exhale with a "Ha!" sound.
13. Take a deep breath, on exhale let out a loud "BLAAAAAH!"
14. Finally, take a deep breath and blow out through the lips causing them to flutter (6 times).

References

Evans, C. and L. Smith. 1992. Acting and the theatre. Tulsa, OK: EDC Publishing.

Appendix 1: Workshop Description

Image Not Currently Available

Appendix 2: Movement warm-up

Image Not Currently Available

Appendix 3: Voice warm-up

Image Not Currently Available